



Uyiko-e Prints

Inaugural Japanese
Woodblock Collection

Online and in the gallery
from April 15th

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INAUGURAL JAPANESE WOODBLOCK COLLECTION

We're excited to release our inaugural collection of Japanese woodblock prints or *ukiyo-e* prints. Carefully selected in Japan by our director Howard, this small but beautifully curated collection of 11 woodblock prints includes various *ukiyo-e* styles such as *kacho-e* (bird and flower prints), *bijin-ga* (beauty prints) and *musha-e* (warrior prints). *Ukiyo-e* art flourished in Japan from predominately the 17th century through to the end of the 19th century. Although *ukiyo-e* artists also produced paintings, their woodblock prints are more commonly associated. The rise and fall of *ukiyo-e* as an art form is closely linked to the period in Japan's history known as the Edo period (c. 1603 to 1868).

In 1603, the city of Edo (modern-day Tokyo) had become the seat of the ruling Tokugawa shogunate. The *chōnin* class (primarily merchants and artisans), those positioned at the bottom of the government-regulated social order, benefited greatly from the city's consequent economic expansion. As a result, they began to indulge more in the city's entertainment sector, particularly the kabuki theatres and licensed brothels. The term, *ukiyo*, meaning 'floating world', quickly developed to describe this emerging indulgent and hedonistic lifestyle. Artists of the day became inspired by these increasingly popular forms of entertainment found in the pleasure districts and *ukiyo-e* eventually came to mean 'pictures of the floating world'.

The main patrons of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints were initially the lower

merchant class, who were now wealthy enough to afford to decorate their homes. *Ukiyo-e* paintings, which were far more expensive, were and remained the privilege of the upper class. Following increasing popularity and demand, *ukiyo-e* genres expanded beyond the earlier images of kabuki actors and beautiful women. For example, landscape *ukiyo-e* emerged as travel became a more viable and common leisure activity in Japan.

All of the woodblocks in our inaugural collection are from the 19th century, a time when the tradition of *ukiyo-e* was at its highest standard, not to mention increasingly in demand from the general public. Each of the artists represented in this collection were not only well known in their own lifetimes but also incredibly commercially successful, especially Toyokuni III, whose contemporary stature rivalled that of Katsushika Hokusai, a vanguard of Japanese woodblock printing and Japanese art in general. Today, each artist is represented in various internationally celebrated collections such as the Tokyo National Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Rijksmuseum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, The British Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.



THE HISTORY OF UKIYO-E

The earliest known painted ukiyo-e works emerged in the mid 1600s. However, by the 1670s, in response to the rising demand for ukiyo-e, Hishikawa Moronobu (1618-94) began producing some of the first ukiyo-e prints. An innovation in Japanese printing, until the 17th century, printing had been reserved for Buddhist texts and images. Moronobu not only produced ukiyo-e prints for books, but also as single-sheet images, which could stand alone or as part of a larger series. He worked in various ukiyo-e genres but developed a distinctive style in his paintings and monochromatic prints for beautiful women. His approach to ukiyo-e attracted a large number of followers, signalling the popularisation of a new print art form.

Colour was gradually introduced to ukiyo-e prints. The complexity of printing multiple colours in one image meant that, for a long time, prints remained *sumizuri-e* (monochrome). At first, colour was added by hand, mostly for special commissions, although this was an expensive process. Eventually, artists began to incorporate two or three colours, typically pink, red, green or indigo/blue. Yet, by the 1760s, the growth in popularity of ukiyo-e brought with it a demand for full-colour ukiyo-e prints known as *nishiki-e*, which could be made from up to ten or more woodblocks. The delicate and romantic prints of Suzuki Harunobu (1725-70) were the first to demonstrate expressive and complex colour compositions. The advent of full colour saw ukiyo-e prints reach their peak.

The mid 18th century had established the popularity for ukiyo-e prints

but the late 18th century saw some of the most significant developments in the tradition as well as several of the most famous masters. Utagawa Toyoharu, founder of the successful Utagawa school, worked mostly in *uki-e*, perspective prints, which demonstrated a mastery of Western perspective. Toyoharu also helped to pioneer landscape as an ukiyo-e subject, rather than merely a background for figures. This paved the way for 19th century virtuosos Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) and also Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) whose *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (c. 1830-32), is still today one of the most renowned works of Japanese art.

Towards the end of the 19th century, confronted with increasing technological and social modernisation, ukiyo-e production went into steep decline. Brutal sociopolitical upheavals had brought down the Tokugawa shogunate in 1867. The cornerstone of ukiyo-e art, Edo society, underwent a dramatic transformation following extreme pressure to modernise along Western lines. By the 1890s, ukiyo-e was essentially obsolete, swept away in the maelstrom of the coming of the modern era. Nevertheless, ukiyo-e served as inspiration for many artistic individuals outside of Japan, particularly the landscapes of Hiroshige and Hokusai. Despite its practical disappearance, it was ukiyo-e that was central in forming the Western obsession with Japanese art at the end of the 19th century, known as Japonisme. Some of its main protagonists were the early Impressionists, Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet and Claude Monet.



UKIYO-E STYLES

Ukiyo-e woodblock artists, in contrast to western artists of the time, were not particularly concerned with depth or dimensionality. Compositions were often asymmetrical and the perspective captured from unusual angles, such as above. In fact, a distinction of ukiyo-e prints was the flat image. Their artists preferred strong lines and graphic designs. Thick and obvious outlines, due to the nature of the printmaking process, were not only inevitable but embraced aesthetic features. These exquisite black lines gave the works an illustrative feel and further heightened their flatness.

The colourful and ostentatious patterns of ukiyo-e are in striking contrast with many concepts in traditional Japanese aesthetics. For example, *wabi-sabi* favours simplicity and imperfection and *shibui* values subtlety, humility, and restraint. However, today, the most celebrated prints contain vivid greens, brilliant reds and cool blues. However, in spite of their brilliant colours, complex designs and seemingly mechanical production, ukiyo-e prints hold a delicacy and deep beauty, one that is reminiscent of hand-painted images.

During the production of traditional ukiyo-e various sub-genres developed. Some developed much later on in the tradition's history and some fluctuated in popularity based on the tastes of the public or sometimes for censorship reasons. One of the first genres was *Yakusha-e* (prints of elaborately dressed kabuki actors), which were created to coincide with performances of particular plays based on traditional legends and stories. *Bijin-ga* or (beauty prints) celebrated

both real and idealised women, at first high-ranking courtesans but later, historic figures, geisha, fictional characters and even everyday women. A much later genre was *Yokohama-e*, which was prints of foreigners arriving in Japan for the first time, following the trade deal made in Yokohama in 1858. In addition to these, there was also *Kacho-e* (flower and bird prints), *Shunga-e* (erotic prints), *Sumo-e* (sumo wrestling prints), *Musha-e* (warrior prints), *Senso-e* (war prints), *Uki-e* (perspective prints which embraced western perspective techniques) and also landscape prints, where artists celebrated the beauty of their surroundings.

TECHNIQUE AND PROCESS

Japanese woodblock printing (*mokuhanga*) is relatively similar to woodcut in western printmaking. The key difference is that the *mokuhanga* technique uses water-based inks rather than oil-based, offering a wider range of colours, glazes and transparency. The first known example of woodblock printing in Japan dates from 794, when Empress Kōken commissioned one million small wooden pagodas containing a small scroll printed with a Buddhist text to be distributed to all temples around Japan as thanks for the suppression of the Emi Rebellion. For centuries after, printing was mostly restricted to the Buddhist sphere for producing important texts and images, as it was seen as too expensive for mass production purposes nor was there a large literate public. It wasn't really until the late 17th and 18th century then that woodblock printing was popularised in mainstream Japan for secular subjects.

To create the woodblock, the first step was for the artist to draw the design onto paper. An exact copy would then be transferred onto thin *washi* (Japanese paper) and pasted onto a block of close-grained and high density wood, typically cherry. Oil was often applied over the top to make the lines of the design more visible. Then, following the outlines of the drawing, a craftsman would carve the image into the wooden block. Using a brush, ink would then be applied to the design left in relief and a piece of paper placed on top. A flat tool called a *baren* was gently rubbed against the surface of the paper to help transfer the ink. To incorporate multiple colours into the same print one would have to repeat the entire process, creating separate

woodblocks for each different coloured ink. A technique of placing two cuts on the edge of each block to act as alignment guides, known as *kento*, was developed to help print multiple blocks with precision. Reproductions would be made until the woodblocks became too worn.

Ukiyo-e artists would rarely carve their own blocks. The production of prints necessitated the combined specialist knowledge of artists, craftsmen, printers and publishers. This team was known as the 'ukiyo-e quartet'. Since the ukiyo-e print was considered a competitive commercial art form, rather than regarded as high art in our western sense, the publisher played a significant role. The publishers also owned the woodblocks and any copyrights, meaning they could reuse the woodblocks without supplementary payment to the artist or craftsman. In addition to the artist's seal, publishers usually marked the ukiyo-e prints with their own, some a simple logo and others quite elaborate, incorporating even an address. The finished prints were mass-marketed, and by the mid 19th century, the circulation of a print could run into the thousands.



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UKIYO-E SCHOOLS

Japanese printmakers tended to organise themselves into schools or movements. Not literal 'schools' of course, however the training of artists was one function of the ukiyo-e studio, into which promising young artists were admitted as apprentices under skilled masters. Many apprentices would go on to take their master's or their school's name if their skill measured up. Artists from the same school were not necessarily united stylistically or always worked in the same genres. For example, the Katsukawa school specialised in various sub-genres including *Nikuhitsu-ga* (ukiyo-e painting), kabuki actor prints, beauty prints and also sumo wrestlers. Whereas, works made by artists from the Kaigetsudō school, founded by Kaigetsudō Ando in c. 1700, have proven extremely difficult to attribute given their inherent stylistic similarities.

In our inaugural collection, four of the artists all proceeded from the utagawa school, Utagawa Kuniyasu, Utagawa Kuniteru, Utagawa Yoshitora and Toyokuni III, also known as Utagawa Kunisada. The final artist Nakayama Sugakudo was perhaps also part of the school, since he apprenticed under fame Utagawa master, Utagawa Hiroshige. It's possible he never took the Utagawa name in order to remain professionally and stylistically independent.

The Utagawa school was formed much later in ukiyo-e tradition by Utagawa Toyoharu in 1842. Over the course of its existence, it became the most famous and commercially successful ukiyo-e

school in the tradition's history. So successful was the school that, today, more than half of all surviving ukiyo-e prints are attributed to Utagawa artists. Utagawa artists didn't follow a single, comprehensive style. Founder Toyoharu had worked mostly in uki-e (perspective prints), whilst his immediate followers, Utagawa Toyohiro and Toyokuni I adopted bolder, more sensuous styles, specialising in landscape and kabuki actor prints respectively. Unfortunately, ukiyo-e scholars have placed little importance posthumously on the influence and commercial success of the Utagawa artists. As a result, only in the past several decades have many of the artists been accredited for their contemporary stature, which compared to and rivalled that of Hiroshige and Hokusai.



CEDAR WAXWING AND CRAPE MYRTLE,
1859

NAKAYAMA SUGAKUDO

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£600

SHINA-HIYODORI AND SNOW COVERED
PINE, 1859

NAKAYAMA SUGAKUDO

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£600





DOVE ON MULBERRY BRANCH,
1859

NAKAYAMA SUGAKUDO

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£600

PLOVERS AND DRY REEDS,
1859

NAKAYAMA SUGAKUDO

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£600





SNIPE, CONVULVULUS,
1859

NAKAYAMA SUGAKUDO

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£600

HOKICHO BIRD, APRICOT, SEKISHO GRASS,
1859

NAKAYAMA SUGAKUDO

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£600





THE SECOND MONTH (KISARAGI),
FROM THE TWELVE MONTHS OF GENJI,
1859

TOYOKUNI III (1786-1864)

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£850

UNKNOWN WARRIOR PRINT,
1815-42

TOYOKUNI III (1786-1864)

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£850





SETSUGEKKA NO UCHI TSUK,
1847-52

UTAGAWA KUNITERU (1808-1876)

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£750

ACTOR ICHIKAWA ICHIZÔ III AS THE
APPRENTICE (DETCHE) ICHIMATSU,
1857

UTAGAWA KUNIYASU (1794-1832)

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£750





ENJOYING THE COOL EVENING NEAR RYOUGOKU,
FROM FIVE SEASONAL FESTIVAL,
1863

UTAGAWA YOSHITORA (C.1850s-1880s)

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT
(FRAMED & GLAZED)

49 x 36.5 cm

£750

THE
STRATFORD
GALLERY

All artworks are available to purchase on receipt of this catalogue. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to get in touch with a member of the gallery team at art@thestratfordgallery.co.uk.